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To the alarm of fliers and security experts alike, federal officials admitted Thursday that undercover agents were able to sneak bomblike items by O'Hare airport screeners more than 60 percent of the time last year.

Yet, federal security officials argue that is a good thing.

"The bar is set high for testing," said Lara Uselding, spokeswoman for the Transportation Security Administration. "We expect failure rates. We don't want (screeners) to get comfortable."

TSA screeners failed to notice fake bombs 60 percent of the time at O'Hare International Airport and 75 percent of the time at Los Angeles International Airport, according to a USA Today report that relied on classified information.

Even strong critics of the TSA's screening process found the numbers stunning.

"Frankly, it is beyond comprehension," said Mathew Lippman, a security expert and University of Illinois at Chicago criminal justice professor. "It is pretty shocking."

The revelations sparked a firestorm of criticism that seems unlikely to end anytime soon.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, a Highland Park Republican, joined the fray and is calling for a conference with federal security officials to discuss training. It remains unclear if TSA officials will agree to the summit.

"Our safety and economy depend on a safe and efficient O'Hare," Kirk said in a statement.

TSA officials confirmed the newspaper report Thursday but attempted to dismiss accusations that the high failure rates reveal significant screening holes.

Uselding said that with the increased testing this year, undercover agents are trying to sneak fake bombs past TSA screeners every day at every airport in the nation.

"We are seeing improvements in our test scores," she said, declining to disclose the latest failure rates.

The criticism comes as calls grow louder for new screening procedures.

American pilots have long advocated for a security system that trains screeners to notice and target fliers who behave oddly.

"There are a lot of ways they can get more efficient," said DC-10 pilot Bill McReynolds, vice chair of the Airline Pilots Association's security committee.

Lippman argues the failure rates wouldn't be so high if screeners could concentrate harder on fliers more likely to be terrorists via a registration system that weeds out frequent fliers, crew members and pilots.

Some travelers at O'Hare airport Thursday took the high failure rates in stride, albeit not because they trust the TSA's work.

"It concerns me," said Wheeling resident R.J. Chesterton, who was waiting for a flight to California near a long screening line. "But it would be a stretch for me to say I thought they were

effective before."